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Mercy MOMENTS

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Anzac Day Remembrance

A young American padre was with advance troops patrolling the hedgerow country of Normandy, just after the D-Day invasion in June 1944. He came upon yet another ruined Norman church, centuries old, which had been shelled by the Navy because of the observation post its belfry afforded the defending Germans. Inside, the padre stopped at a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, arms outstretched but blown off at the elbows. What caused the young chaplain to stop was that some GI had stopped long enough, in the haze of battle, to fashion a rough sign to hang on the statue which read: " HE HAS NO HANDS ... BUT YOURS."

I heard this story in the seventies, when the Second World War was but thirty years over, a healthy number of our First World War diggers were still around, and our young men were just back from Vietnam. Since then, of course, there have been deployments to Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

This year, 2016, marks the centenary of this country's first and most bloody engagements on the Western Front; it is 75 years since the heroics at Tobruk and the shambles of Greece, Crete and Malaya; the Korean battle of Kapyong will be 65 years past; and incredibly, 50 years since Long Tan.

This is quite an anniversary list. Those who lost their lives; those who came back to build a great country, and the families who supported them and suffered as well, should all be remembered.

War's impact reaches far beyond the battlefield, as we all know. The casualties at Fromelles and Pozieres – 28,000 in seven weeks – and the resulting conscription referenda – charged the political and social landscape of Australia for two generations. Many of us remember first-hand the upheaval of the Vietnam years.

One of my great experiences in recent times was to take a group of Vietnam diggers to Villers-Bretonneux in France, to mark the Anzac Centenary in 2015. It

would be fair to say that public ambivalence about their role in South-East Asia had affected them, some more than others, over the 50 years since. It is only now that some of them believed they could buy into the tradition that they felt had been denied them since coming home. Some cited a lack of compassion and understanding from friends, family and the authorities as they struggled with the physical and psychological injuries of war. Others said that quite enough had been done for them, but that getting to grips with their part in the war still troubled them.

There was consensus that, over time, they encountered greater compassion for what they endured in the name of Australia, and above all else, this factor had been important in getting them through their post-war difficulties.

One of the tour's highlights was observing the interactions of these old diggers and current serving members of the ADF – many of whom have had several deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. The exchanges were warm – familial. The view was expressed that fanfare can usurp remembrance, and that compassion, mercy and justice for returned servicemen and women, and their families should be embraced as policy, rather than commemoration for its own sake.



In the five years or so after the end of the First World War, 60,000 Australians died of war-related causes, as many as died in the war itself.

In this current post-war period, we are in a better position than we were then – with the resources we have and the experience

of a century of war – to be vocal and pro-active in our responses to the people who have recently served our country faithfully.

This response of mercy is in our hands.

Source: Kieran McCarthy for Anzac Day 2016. Kieran is a member of Mercy Partners Council.